Supreme Court, U.S.
FILED

(1)

No. 99-467

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IN THE

SUPREME COURT OF THE
UNITED STATES

SHARRON TRICE,

Petitioner,

VS.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES FOR THE OKOLONA MUNICIPAL SEPARATE SCHOOL DISTRICT; W. HOWARD GUNN, EDDIE BRASFIELD, GEORGE MAYFIELD, WILLIAM RANDLE, and LYNN FAIR, In Their Capacity as Board Members; and GERALD HEGAN, Individually and in his Capacity as Superintendent

Respondents

On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit

---

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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32 pp

QUESTION PRESENTED

Does the Policy and Procedure Manual, as well as Rules and Regulations, adopted by a public school district alter at-will employment and create property rights which must be respected?

PARTIES

All of the parties are listed on the caption.

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No. 99-

IN THE
SUPREME COURT OF THE
UNITED STATES

OCTOBER TERM, 1999

SHARRON TRICE,

Petitioner,

V.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES FOR THE OKOLONA MUNIPICAL SEPARATE SCHOOL DISTRICT, ET AL

Respondents

On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit

---

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Petitioner Sharron Trice respectfully prays that this Court issue a Writ of Certiorari to review the judgment and opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit entered on June 11, 1999.

OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the Fifth Circuit is set out at pp. 1a-2a of the Appendix hereto. The opinion of the district court granting the respondent's motion for summary judgment is set out at pp. 4a-13a of the Appendix.

JURISDICTION

The decision of the Fifth Circuit was entered on June 11, 1999. The jurisdiction of this court is invoked pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §1254.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED

This case involves an employee's right to work under 42 U.S.C. 1983. It also involves "Common Law" as it relates to a public employer's right to terminate in violation of its own Policy and Procedure Manual as well as Rules and Regulations adopted by the public school district. Employee rights are also invoked under the Due Process Clause and Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution of the United States .

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Petitioner Sharron Trice began her employment with the respondent school district in July, 1995 as an administrator. She was employed as Director of the Okolona Vo-Tech Center in Okolona Mississippi. Petitioner served in this capacity until terminated in June, 1997, by her new superintendent, Gearld Hegan. Mr. Hegan was employed in August, 1996, and within a few months he notified petitioner, as well as all other administrators, that she would be terminated for poor job performance. (App.4a)

At the time the superintendent was appointed, and at all times relevant hereto, the respondent school district was operating under Rules and Regulations which obligated the superintendent to follow certain guidelines prior to termination. Specifically, the superintendent was required to follow Personnel Appraisal Procedure. (App.6a)

There were racial implications in the firing of petitioner. The new superintendent's appointment was racially controversial. The school board appointed Mr. Hegan against the recommendation of the outgoing superintendent, who was white, and over the objections of the black board members. The other candidate was black. (App. 5a)

Although petitioner was not directly involved in the racial controversy involving the school board, she was adversely affected because

the new superintendent, within months of his appointment, issued termination notices to all the administrators that were employed by his predecessor. (App.8a)

Because of the racial implications aforestated, and because of her due process rights and property rights under 42 U.S.C. Section 1983 and the U.S. Constitution, petitioner filed her Complaint in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi. In addition, petitioner asserted her rights under state law pursuant to pendent jurisdiction.

On May 11, 1998, the respondent filed a motion for summary judgment claiming that petitioner's rights were not violated under Title VII. As for petitioners common law rights, respondent simply responds that a violation of one's policies, practices or procedures does not bestow upon an employee a private cause of action entitling plaintiff to remedial relief.

On October 30, 1998, the District Court granted Summary Judgment against petitioner on all grounds. (App.3a)

On November 13,1998, petitioner filed her Notice of Appeal to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. On June 11, 1999, the Fifth Circuit Summarily affirmed the decision of the District Court. (App.1a)

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT

Petitioner is abandoning in this court her claim of racial discrimination, because this claim does not raise any issues for which this court would likely grant a writ; however, the petition for writ of certiorari should be granted to hear petitioner's claim that the respondents violated due process and her property rights.

The decision of the Fifth Circuit conflicts with rulings from several other circuits, and this case should be heard to resolve the conflicts between the circuits on the effect that policy manuals, handbooks, rules and regulations adopted by a public school district can have on at-will employment.

The decision of the Fifth Circuit also conflicts with other decisions it has rendered relative to employment at-will.

Finally the Fifth Circuit totally disregarded petitioner's property rights under 42 U.S.C. Section 1983.

I. The Decision Below Is Conflict With Decisions In Numerous Other Circuits

This case concerns the Fifth Circuit's interpretation and application of the "employment at will" doctrine. The Fifth Circuit refused to address the issues raised by petitioner except to say that "we affirm for the reasons given by the

District Court." The district court's opinion similarly falls short of addressing the issues, as the following quote demonstrates:

> Finally, the plaintiff contends that the defendants violated the established policies, practices and procedures of the school district in one or more ways, including not following the exact letter of the school district's personnel appraisal process. The court finds that the plaintiff has failed to cite any authority for such a cause of action against the school district, and therefore the plaintiff's claims for various violations of school policies should be dismissed.

The district court simply ignored or refused to acknowledge *Bobbitt v. Orchard, LTD, 603 So. 2d 356 (Miss.1992)* which was cited by petitioner. In pertinent part the Mississippi Supreme Court in *Bobbitt* states the following:

> ...The question in this case is when an employer furnishes its employees a detailed manual stating its rules of employment, and setting forth procedures that will be followed in event of infraction of its rules of employment, can it completely ignore the manual in discharging an employee for the infraction clearly covered by the manual? Put otherwise, when an offense specifically covered by the employer's own manual

> provides no more severe disciplining than a warning or counseling of the employee, may the employer pay no attention to the manual and fire the employee instead?...
>
> .....
>
> ... [W]e hold the employer to its word...

Even though the *Bobbitt* case, supra, makes it clear that an employer cannot chose to ignore its own policy manuals and rules and regulations, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals disregarded Mississippi case law.

In *Gorrill v. Iceland/Flugleidir*, 761 F.2d 847 (2nd Cir. 1985), the 2nd Circuit stated that company's operations manual constituted a binding contract.

In *Lawrence v. National Westminister Bank*, 98 F.3d 61(3rd Cir. 1996), the 3rd Circuit stated that a company's employment manual may contractually bind the company.

In *Mix v. University of New Orleans*, 609 So. 2d 958 (4th Cir. 1992) the 4th Circuit suggests that if the employee did not negotiate or bargain for terms of the grievance procedure, it does not create any rights.

In *Gagne v. Northwestern Nat. Ins.Co.*, 881 F.2d 309 (6th Cir. 1989), the 6th Circuit stated that an employee handbook did not create an implied contract under state law that could be breached.

The 7th Circuit takes the position that an employee handbook may alter at will employment if it contains express conditions from which it reasonably could be inferred that the employee had certain substantive or procedural rights. *Fittshur v. Village of Menomonee Falls*, 31 F.3d 401

In *Bethea v. Levi Strauss & Co.*, 827 F.2d 355 (8th Cir. 1987), the 8th Circuit ruled that although an employer failed to follow its lay off guidelines in its internal personnel manual, of lay off criteria did not change employee's at-will status and create claim for breach of contract.

In the 8th Circuit an employee's at-will status can be altered by "policy statement". *Qualls v. Hickory Springs Mfg. Co.*, 994 2d 505 (8th Cir.1993).

In *McIlravy v. Kerr-McGee Corp*, 74 F.3d, 1017 (10th Cir. 1996) the 10th Circuit found that genuine issue of material of fact precluding summary judgment existed in whether employer's 1976 and 1977 handbooks promised not to discharge employee absent "cause" for dismissal, where company representatives referred to handbooks as "employee bibles."

In *Jackson v. Integra, Inc.* 952 F.2d 1260 (10th Cir. 1991) the 10th Circuit stated that an employee manual can create implied contract if circumstances warrant.

II. The Decision Below Is In Conflict with Other Decisions Of The Fifth Circuit

In *Smith v. Kerrville Bus Co.*, 709 F.2d 914 (5th Cir. 1983), the 5th Circuit decided that an employer should not have been granted summary judgment against the employee under at-will contract where driver claimed he was wrongfully terminated in violation of a drivers rulebook.

In *Wallace v. Shreve Memorial Library*, 79 F.3d 427 (5th Cir. 1996), the 5th Circuit stated that an employment manual is merely a unilateral statements by a public employer of what actions it considered unacceptable and did not meet the requirements of employment contracts as would modify employee's at will startus and create a property interest in employment.

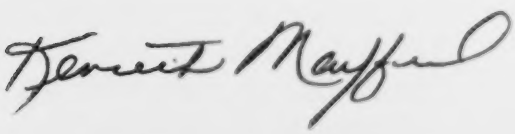
III. The Fifth Circuit Totally Disregarded Petitioner's Property Rights Protected By 42 U.S.C., Section 1983

In *Whitfield v. Finn*, 731 F.2d 1506 (11th Cir. 1984), the 11th Circuit held that a "published rule" can alter at will employment. In *Whitfield* a policeman was claiming he was denied due process of law under 42 U.S.C. 1983 for deprivation of his job without due process of law. The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals held that the policeman was vested with a property right for purposes of the federal suit.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the Petition for a Writ of Certiorari should be granted and the decision of the court below reversed.

Respectfully submitted,



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APPENDIX

NO. 98060728
UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FIFTH CIRCUIT

SHARRON W. TRICE
Plaintiff – Appellant,

v.

Board of Trustees of the Okolona Municipal Separate School District, et al.
Defendant – Appellee

APPEAL FROM THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF MISSISSIPPI(1:97CV234-B-D)

Before **DAVIS, DUHÉ,** and **PARKER,** Circuit Judges.

Per Curiam: [1]

Sharron Trice ("Trice") worked as the director of the Vo-Tech Complex for the Okolona Municipal Separate School District from 1995 to 1997. In 1997, upon the superintendent's recommendation, the school board voted not to renew Trice's employment contract. Trice sued the school district, the school board members, and the superintendent "Defendants," alleging (1) race discrimination; (2) violation of her First Amendment right to free speech; (3) violation of her right to due process; (4) violation of the

School Employment Procedures Act; (5) violation of the personnel appraisal process and other established policies, practices and procedures of the school district. The district court granted the Defendants' motion for summary judgment. Trice Appeals.

We review a grant of summary judgment de novo, viewing the facts and inferences in the light most favorable to the nonmovant. See Hall v. Gillman Inc., 81 F. 3d 35, 36-37 (5th Cir. 1996). After a careful review of the briefs and the record, we conclude that the district court properly granted summary judgment for the Defendants, We affirm for the reasons given by the district court.

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[1] Pursuant to 5TH Cir. R. 47.5, the Court has determined that this opinion should not be published and is not precedent except under the limited circumstances set forth in 5TH Cir. R. 47.5.4.

NO. 1:97-CV-234-B-D
IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF MISSISSIPPI EASTERN DIVISION

SHARRON W. TRICE,
Plaintiff

v.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE OKOLONA MUNICIPAL SEPARATE SCHOOL DISTRICT,
ET AL.
Defendant.

ORDER

In accordance with the memorandum opinion this day issued, it is **ORDERED:**

that the defendants' motion for summary judgment is **GRANTED;** and that this cause is **DIMISSED with prejudice.**

THIS, the 30 day of October, 1998.

/s/_____
NEAL B. BIGGERS, JR.
CHIEF JUDGE

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF MISSISSIPPI EASTERN DIVISION

SHARRON W. TRICE
Plaintiff

v. **234-B-D**

BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE OKOLONA MUNICIPAL SEPARATE SCHOOL DISTRICT; W. HOWARD GUNN, EDDIE BRASFIELD, GEORGE MAYFIELD, WILLIAM RANDLE, and LYNN FAIR, In Their Capacity as Board Members; and GERALD HEGAN, Individually and in his Capacity as Superintendent
Defendants

MEMORANDUM OPINION

This cause comes before the court upon the defendants' motion for summary judgment. Upon due consideration of the parties' memoranda and exhibits, the court is ready to rule.

FACTS

The plaintiff, a black female, served as director of the Okolona Vo-Tech Complex from 1995-1997 (two school years). She has a master's degree and holds AA certification from the State

of Mississippi in the areas of Administration and as a Vo-Tech Director.

The defendant Gerald Hegan, a white male, holds a master's degree and AA certification, presumably in Administration. He was appointed superintendent of the Okolona School District in August of 1996 by a three-two vote of the school board. The board's vote was split along racial line. The outgoing superintendent has recommended Larry Dantzler for the job of superintendent. Dantzler, a black male, was the assistant superintendent at the time. According to the plaintiff, Dantzler had more experience and was more qualified for the job the Hegan.

The plaintiff received her first evaluation from the defendant Hegan of February 5, 1997. On February 10, 1997, the defendant Hegan went to the school board and recommended that plaintiff's contract of employment not be renewed. Pursuant to the School Employment Procedures Act ("SEPA"), the plaintiff requested a list of reasons for her non-renewal and a hearing. The hearing was held on April 10 and 14, 1997, before a local attorney, Michael Malski. The plaintiff was allowed to put on evidence and cross-examine the district's witnesses. Upon agreement of the parties, Malski kept the record open for 15 working days. The plaintiff thus asserts that the hearing was concluded on May 5, 1997. The defendants assert that the hearing concluded on May 30,1997, the date Malski submitted a Report and Recommendation to the

school board recommending that the non-renewal be upheld. After oral argument before the school board on June 23, 1997, the board voted to accept the Report and Recommendation. The plaintiff subsequently filed suit for racial discrimination, violation of her First Amendment right to free speech, violation of due process, violation of the School Employment Procedures Ac, violation of the defendants' personnel appraisal process, and violation of established policies, practices, and procedures of the school district.

LAW

On a motion for summary judgment, the movant has the initial burden of showing the absence of a genuine issue of material fact. Celotex Corp. v. Catrett, 477 U.S. 317, 325, 91 L. Ed. 2d 265, 275 (1986) ("the burden on the moving party may be discharged by 'showing'...that there is an absence of evidence to support the non-moving party's case"). Under Rule 56 (e) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, the burden shifts to the non-movant to "go beyond pleadings and by...affidavits, of by the 'deposition, answers to interrogatories, and admission on file, 'designate 'specific facts showing that there is a genuine issue for trial."' Celotex Corp., 477 U.S. at 324, 91 L.Ed. 2d at 274. That burden is not discharged by "mere allegations or denials." Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(e). All legitimate factual inferences must be made in favor of the non-movant . Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc., 477 U.S.242,255,91 L.Ed.2d 202, 216 (1986). Rule 56(c) mandates the entry of

summary judgment "against a party who fails to make a showing sufficient to establish the existence of an element essential to that party's case, and on which that party will bear the burden of proof at trial." Celotex Corp., 477 U.S. at 322, 91 L.Ed. 2d at 273. Before finding that no genuine issue for trial exist, the court must first be satisfied that no reasonable trier of fact could find for the non-movant. Matsushita Elec. Indus. V. Zenith Radio Corp., 475 U.S. 574, 587, 89L.Ed.2d 538,552 (1986).

To present a prima facie case of racial discrimination under Title VII, the plaintiff may show: (1) that she was a member of a protected class; (2) that she was qualified for the position held; (3) that she was subject to an adverse employment decision; and (4) that she was replaced by someone outside of the subject classification. Meinecke v. H&R Block, 66 F.3d 77, 83 (5th Cir. 1995); Marks v. Prattco, Inc., 607 F.2d 1153, 1155 (5th Cir. 1979). A plaintiff may always present a prima facie case by offering direct evidence of discrimination, in which case the four-part test developed for circumstantial evidence is unnecessary. Lee v. Russell County Bd. Of Educ., 684 F.2d 769, 774f (5th Cir. 1982). Once the plaintiff presents a prima facie case, the defendant must articulate a legitimate, non-discriminatory reason for the employment action. McDonnell-Douglas Corp. v. Green, 411 U.S. 792, 802-805, 36 L.Ed. 2d 668, 677-679 (1973). If the defendant is able to do so, the burden of production shifts back to the plaintiff to produce

evidence that the defendant's articulated reason is merely a pretext for discrimination. Id.

The court will assume, for purposes of this motion for summary judgment, that the plaintiff has made the initial prima facie showing under McDonnell Douglas. The defendants have cited seven areas in which the plaintiff's job performance was deficient, each of which provides a legitimate, non-discriminatory reason for the defendants' failure to renew the plaintiff's employment contract. The burden thus shifts back to the plaintiff to show that the defendants' articulated reasons are merely a pretext for discrimination.

The plaintiff makes three arguments in her attempt to establish that the defendants' articulated reasons are merely a pretext for discrimination. First, the plaintiff asserts that Hegan's appointment to the position of superintendent was tainted with racial discrimination. However, the plaintiff was not a candidate for the position of superintendent. Any racial bias in the selection of Hegan has no application to the plaintiff's claim of racial discrimination in the non-renewal of her contract as director of the Okolona Vo-Tech Complex.

Second, the plaintiff asserts that the "cleaning house"[1] approach of Hegan had a disparate impact on black administrators. However, the court finds that the disparate impact analysis is inappropriate in this type of case involving alleged individual discrimination. The disparate impact analysis would be more appropriate in a situation where the school district's racially neutral employment requirements had a disparate impact on the number of blacks who were qualified for positions.

Finally, the plaintiff asserts that an incident involving a post card sent from Hegan to Jerome Smith, the principal of Okolona High School whose contract of employment was likewise not renewed, presents direct evidence of a discriminatory bias. A few months[2] after Hegan had recommended that the plaintiff's contract not be renewed, Hegan received a post card with a

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[1] Apparently, all of the top administrators in the Okolona School District were let go after the 1997 school year, including the principals at Okolona High School and Okolona Elementary School and the director of the Okolona Vo-Tech Complex.

[2] Neither party provides an exact date for the post card incident and the postmark on the copy of the envelope sent to Jerome Smith is illegible, but the defendant Hegan indicates in his deposition that the post card incident occurred in July of 1997.

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picture of a smiling monkey, wearing a graduation cap, and the caption "WHAT? You've NEVER been to Harvard?" On the flip side of the card were the words "Ha, Ha, But we have."[3] The defendant Hegan believed that the card had been sent from Smith and Dan Rupert, who were apparently in Boston at the time. Rupert, a white male, was the principal of Okolona Elementary School, and his contract, like that of the plaintiff and Smith, had not been renewed for the coming year. Hegan testified that he took the card as a joke, as did the office employees, who were laughing and teasing him about the card. In response, he wrote the words "I recognized you immediately! Glad you're looking so happy and rested." below the picture of the monkey. Hegan left the card on his desk and his secretary, of her own accord, sent a copy of the card with the added words to both Smith and Rupert.

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[3] The court is unsure whether these words were printed by the creator of the card or written by the sender, as the flip side of the card was not submitted as an exhibit.

[4] The plaintiff questions the extent of defendant Hegan's involvement in mailed the card. However, both Hegan and his secretary have stated under oath that the secretary mailed the card of her own accord and the plaintiff has provided no evidence to the contrary.

3

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The plaintiff contends that the words written by the defendant Hegan show discriminatory animus towards members of the black race. However, the court finds that the post card is not sufficient to establish either a prima facie case of racial discrimination or that the articulated reasons for non-renewal of plaintiff's contract are really a pretext for discrimination. All of the evidence indicates that the words were written merely as a joke, towards both a black and a white administrator, with no offense intended. A copy of the card was mailed by the secretary to both Smith and Rupert. Furthermore, all of this took place long after Hegan had made the decision to not renew the plaintiff's contract. Accordingly, considering all of the evidence before the court, the courts finds that the incident with the post card is insufficient to allow the plaintiff to survive summary judgment on the issue of racial discrimination.

The court likewise finds that the plaintiff cannot establish a violation of due process under the Fourteenth Amendment. SEPA provides limited due process rights to certified public school district employees. SEPA requires the school district to furnish written notice of the reasons for non-renewal of an employee contract and an opportunity for a post-non-renewal hearing before a fair and impartial board of hearing officer. Housley v. North Panola Consol. Sch. Dist., 656 F. Supp. 1087, 1091 (N.D. Miss. 1987); Desoto County Sch. Bd. v. Garrett, 508 So.2d 1091, 1093 (Miss. 1987). The evidence is undisputed that the plaintiff received both notice

of the reasons for her non-renewal and a hearing before an impartial hearing officer where the plaintiff was permitted to present evidence and witnesses in her behalf, as well as cross-examine witnesses presented by the school district. Accordingly, the court finds that the plaintiff has failed to establish any violation of her due process rights under the Fourteenth Amendment.

The plaintiff further contends that the defendants violated SEPA by not notifying her of the board's decision within 30 days of the conclusion of the hearing. Miss. Code Ann. §37-9-111(4). The plaintiff asserts that the hearing provided pursuant to the provisions of SEPA concluded on May 5 and that she was not notified on the board's final decision until June 26, over 30 days later. However, the decision to hold oral argument before the board on June 23 was made after consulting with plaintiff's counsel, who agreed to the date without raising an objection as to the 30-day requirement. Plaintiff was represented by counsel at the hearing before the board and no objection was made at the time as to the running of the 30-day period. The court finds that the plaintiff's failure to raise a 30-day issue when scheduling the oral argument or during the oral argument precludes the plaintiff from asserting a violation of the statute now. Furthermore, even if the defendants have committed a technical violation of the statute, so long s there was a substantial and manifestly good faith attempt by the board to comply with the Act and the employee was represented by counsel, procedural defects will not render the board's

actions unlawful. See Cox v. Thomas, 403 So.2d 135m 137-138 (Miss. 1981). For that reason as well, the courts finds that there has been no violation of the statute.

To establish a prima facie claim of violation of the plaintiff's First Amendment rights, the plaintiff must show that her conduct is constitutionally protected and that it was a substantial or motivating factor in the school district's decision not to renew her contract. Day v. South Park Indep. Sch. Dist., 768 F.2d 696, 700 (5th Cir. 1985), cert. Denied, 474 U.S. 1101 (1986); Lindsey v. Mississippi Research and Dev. Ctr., 652 F2d 488, 492 (5th Cir. Unit A, Aug. 1981). Although the plaintiff asserts a First Amendment cause of action in her complaint, she has made no allegation that she engaged in any constitutionally protected conduct. The plaintiff does not even address the First Amendment claim, the court finds that it should be dismissed.

Finally, the plaintiff contends that the defendants violated the established policies, practices, and procedures of the school district in one or more ways, including not following to the exact letter of the school district's personnel appraisal process. The court finds that the plaintiff has failed to cite any authority for such a cause of action against the school district, and therefore the plaintiff's claims for violation of various school policies should be dismissed.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reason, the court finds that the defendant's motion for summary judgment should be granted. An order will issue accordingly.

THIS, the 30 day of October, 1998.

/s/_____

NEAL BIGGERS, JR.
CHIEF JUDGE